

Korea talks to resume Aug 5

WASHINGTON, July 20: The United States, China, South Korea and North Korea will meet in Geneva next month to discuss ways to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula, the US State Department said on Monday, reports Reuters.

The meeting, to be chaired by China, was scheduled to begin on August 5. State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

"Our goals in these four-party talks remain the same, that is, the reduction of tension on the Korean peninsula," Rubin told reporters.

The meeting will mark the sixth round of four-party talks, launched in an effort to forge a permanent peace between North Korea and South Korea, which fought a war in 1950-53. The conflict ended with an armistice that is badly fraying.

The last round of talks took place April 24-27, also in Geneva.

The new negotiations occur amid persistent worries about North Korea's fired missile over Japanese air space last August and there has been some concern recently that it may be preparing to test a missile with an even longer range. North Korea said it launched a satellite, not a missile.

Clinton to attend Balkans summit in Sarajevo July 30

WASHINGTON, July 20: US President Bill Clinton announced yesterday he will attend an international summit in Sarajevo to forge a stability pact for the Balkans on July 30, reports AFP.

The leaders will discuss ways to strengthen peace and stability, deepen democracy and civil society and promote economic reforms throughout southeast Europe," the White House said in a statement.

The heads of state and government will come from the some 30 countries and various international organisations that on June 10 signed a "Stability Pact" on reconstruction in the region.

The meeting will be chaired by President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, which will hold the European Union's rotating six-month presidency from July 1.

Kennedy's sister-in-law makes last call to HK friend

HONG KONG, July 20: The sister-in-law of John F. Kennedy Jr spoke by telephone to a friend in Hong Kong before boarding the fatal flight, a newspaper said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Lauren Bessette, 34, talked to Irene Chu, a former classmate at the University of Pennsylvania, on Friday afternoon before rushing off to hitch a ride with her sister Carolyn and her husband, the late president's son.

Chu's husband Victor Chu Lap-lik, who had employed Bessette at his investment company, told the South China Morning Post: "Lauren was telling my wife how she was going to Martha's Vineyard and they would get together when they got back. She was rushing off."

Bessette studied Chinese at the University of Hong Kong before starting work in October 1992 with Chu's company.

"She was a delightful person, a wonderful friend and colleague -- highly intelligent, sophisticated and loyal," said Chu.

She left the firm in 1994 for finance house Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, where she was vice-president of investment banking. She returned to Morgan Stanley's New York office in February last year when she was promoted to principal.

On Monday, US authorities abandoned hope of finding any survivors three days after the aircraft went down off the New England island resort.

25 die as boat capsizes in river in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, July 20: At least 25 people drowned when a sudden wave overturned a boat on the River Tavi in eastern Pakistan, according to press reports Tuesday. Another 75 people swam to safety, reports AP.

The boat was carrying mostly farmers from their fields on one side of the river to the village of Surkhpur on the other in the Tando area of Punjab province on Monday night, the English-language newspaper The News said.

India ratifies convention on land mine use

NEW DELHI, July 20: India's Cabinet on Tuesday ratified an international convention banning the use of land mines against civilians and prepared to write it into its national laws, reports AP.

The Cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed to prohibit the use of land mines that cannot be detected by commonly used mine detectors, a provision provided in Protocol II of the International Convention against the use of land mines, said Information Minister Pramod Mahajan.

Some 110 million land mines are scattered across 64 countries. In addition, 2-5 million mines are laid each year, he said.

China mobilises combat troops near Taiwan coast

HONG KONG, July 20: China has mobilised combat troops near the Taiwan coast and put them on a state of high alert as Beijing steps up pressure on the island to back off from its new stance on statehood, a pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper reported Tuesday, reports AP.

The troops in the southern and eastern military zones of Nanjing, Guangzhou and Jinan were seen carrying weapons and military equipment, suggesting the maneuvers in recent days were not merely a routine "shift of duty," Wen Wei Po reported, quoting eyewitnesses it did not identify.

It did not say when and where the eyewitnesses saw the troops, or what weapons they were carrying.

A photo showing Chinese soldiers marching next to a line of military vehicles was shown on the Wen Wei Po's front page, with no details about when and where the photo was taken.

Meanwhile, the sensational Chinese-language Apple Daily reported Beijing has ordered military experts to draft battle plans "as economic officials evaluate the financial impact on the country if it goes to war."

But an imminent attack is unlikely because it would take China months to draw up such war plans, the paper quoted an unidentified source as saying.

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A photograph released yesterday shows Chinese Marines jumping off a tank during military exercise some time last week at an undisclosed location in southern China. China issued a strong warning to Taiwan yesterday following repeated demands by the island's President Lee Teng-hui that it be treated as a sovereign state. — AFP photo

Clinton offers more military aid to Israel

WASHINGTON, July 20: President Bill Clinton is establishing a new strategic partnership with Israel and promising boosts in US military aid and up to 50 jet fighters as inducements for territorial concessions by Prime Minister Ehud Barak to the Palestinians and Syria, reports AP.

US military aid to Israel will be boosted by nearly one-third, from \$1.9 billion a year currently to \$2.4 billion annually over the next decade — if Congress approves. And the administration is urging Congress to approve a special \$1.2 billion appropriation to carry out a pullback on the West Bank.

Barak is responding with enthusiasm to the overtures, promising to test the perilous waters of Mideast peacemaking for the next 15 months. "By then we should know," the new prime minister said Monday after a fourth day of talks with Clinton.

He registered a willingness to take risks for peace, but also assured the Israeli people that he would be ever mindful of their security concerns.

At the same time, Barak carefully avoided saying how much land he would relinquish — on the West Bank to the Palestinians and on the Golan Heights to Syria.

"We are not talking about a miraculous solution," Barak said at a joint White House news conference with Clinton. Peace, he said, "will not drop upon us from heaven in three weeks."

Even so, Barak's willingness to try to end a three-year stalemate in negotiations with Syria and a seven-month impasse with the Palestinians inspired Clinton and his senior advisers to lavish praise on the former general.

"Your first visit as Israel's leader has been an enormous success," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told Barak in an exchange of toasts at a dinner Monday night at the residence of Israeli Ambassador Zalman Shoval.

"America's support for Israel's security, including a strategic edge, is rock solid," she said.

And she assured Barak, who urged the United States openly not to take on the role of "judge" between Israel and its Arab neighbours, that she understood "the hard decisions that lie ahead can only be made by those in the region."

Barak and Albright were continuing their talks Tuesday at her home in the Georgetown section of Washington. He also was due to meet with members of Congress and to call on Vice President Al Gore before flying to London.

The new strategic partnership set up by Clinton and Barak calls for US and Israeli security experts to establish a joint group and submit to the two leaders "measures to bolster Israel's indigenous defense and deterrent capabilities."

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